

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 13, 2016

Agenda Item: Grassland Conservation Leases

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

FWP proposes to offer 30-year conservation leases to willing, eligible landowners who agree to protect native grassland, sagebrush, and wetlands. In exchange for a one-time payment of \$15/acre, willing landowners would agree for the 30-year contract period not to convert enrolled habitats to cropland agriculture, drain natural wetlands, or apply herbicides that are detrimental to native plants. Under the lease, other traditional land uses, such as grazing, would be encouraged. Landowners would also agree to offer negotiated public access for game bird hunting and, depending on funding source, recreational viewing. Funding for leases would come from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (\$180,000), USDA-NRCS Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (\$706,787), Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (\$200,000; no more than \$100,000/project), and Migratory Bird Wetland Program (\$100,000). Current funding would allow FWP to offer leases on approximately 75,000 acres through 2019. Additional funding would expand the opportunity.

The prairies and shrub-steppe habitats of Montana provide critical habitat for many declining grassland birds, including Sprague's pipit and greater sage-grouse. The Prairie Pothole Region of Montana supports the highest densities of nesting northern pintail in the nation. However, Montana continues to lose native rangeland habitat and these losses have led to recent ESA listing petitions. FWP proposes to offer this conservation lease incentive to willing landowners to help support and maintain ranching operations while simultaneously assuring conservation of native wildlife habitat. FWP offered a similar opportunity in 2005-2007 called Sagebrush Leases and landowners enrolled ~ 200,000 acres in 30-year agreements. The US Fish and Wildlife Service considered those 200,000 acres as protected from cropland conversion in their recent decision not to list the greater sage-grouse as threatened under the ESA. Additional acres would help keep other prairie species from being federally listed.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Upon Commission endorsement, a public comment period would run through 5 p.m. Monday, November 14, 2016. The Upland Game Bird Council and Wetland Protection Advisory Council have favorably reviewed a conservation lease proposal.

Alternatives and Analysis

The proposed action is to offer 30-year conservation leases to willing, eligible landowners. The alternative is to forego offering a lease opportunity to private landowners and not protecting additional habitat.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the Commission endorse this proposal. The leases would support working ranches and while assuring conservation of approximately 75,000 acres of wildlife habitat.

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission endorse offering 30-year grassland conservation leases as presented by FWP.